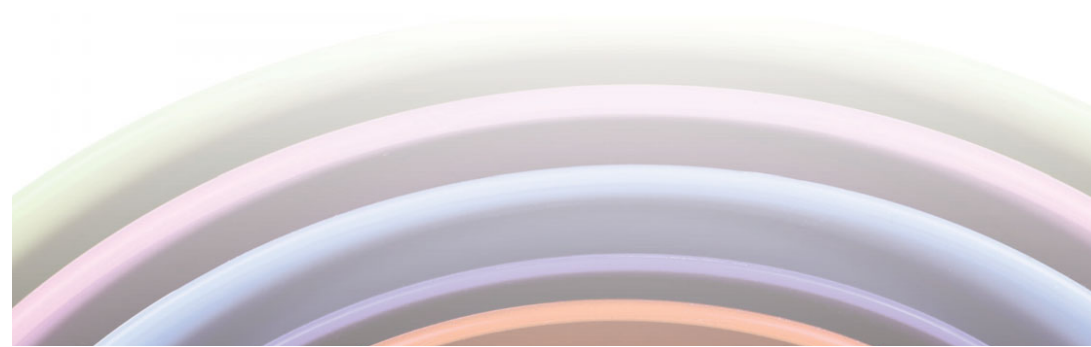


6

Ethics and politics in social research

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Chapter guide

Ethical issues arise at a variety of stages in social research. This chapter deals with the concerns about ethics that might arise in the course of conducting research. The professional bodies concerned with the social sciences have been keen to spell out the ethical issues that can arise, and some of their statements will be reviewed in this chapter. Ethical issues cannot be ignored, as they relate directly to the integrity of a piece of research and of the disciplines that are involved. While ethical issues constitute the main emphasis of this chapter, related issues to do with the politics of research are also discussed. This chapter explores:

- some famous, even infamous, cases in which transgressions of ethical principles have occurred, though it is important not to take the view that ethical concerns arise only in relation to these extreme cases;
- different stances that can be and have been taken on ethics in social research;
- the significance and operation of four areas in which ethical concerns particularly arise: whether harm comes to participants; informed consent; invasion of privacy; and deception;
- some of the difficulties associated with ethical decision-making;
- some of the main political dimensions of research, from gaining access to research situations to the publication of findings.

Introduction

Discussions about the ethics of social research bring us into a realm in which the role of values in the research process becomes a topic of concern. They revolve around such issues as:

- How should we treat the people on whom we conduct research?
- Are there activities in which we should or should not engage in our relations with them?

Questions about ethics in social research also bring in the role of professional associations, such as the British Sociological Association (BSA) and the Social Research Association (SRA), which have formulated codes of ethics. The BSA's and SRA's codes will be referred to on several occasions.

Statements of professional principles are frequently accessible from the Internet. Some of the most useful codes of ethics can be found at the following Internet addresses.

- British Sociological Association (BSA), *Statement of Ethical Practice*: www.britisoc.ac.uk/NR/rdonlyres/801B9A62-5CD3-4BC2-93E1-FF470FF10256/0/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf
- Social Research Association (SRA), *Ethical Guidelines*: www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/pdfs/ethics03.pdf
- British Psychological Society (BPS), *Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles, and Guidelines*: [www.bps.org.uk/document-download-area/document-download\\$.cfm?file_uuid=E6917759-9799-434A-F313-9C35698E1864&ext=pdf](http://www.bps.org.uk/document-download-area/document-download$.cfm?file_uuid=E6917759-9799-434A-F313-9C35698E1864&ext=pdf)
- American Sociological Association (ASA), *Code of Ethics*: www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf
- The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), *Framework for Research Ethics* (see Tips and skills 'The ESRC's Framework for Research Ethics' below): www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/Framework%20for%20Research%20Ethics%202010_tcm6-35811.pdf

All these statements were accessed on 5 August 2010.

Writings about ethics in social research are frequently frustrating for four reasons.

1. Writers often differ quite widely from each other over ethical issues and questions. In other words, they differ over what is and is not ethically acceptable.

2. The main elements in the debates do not seem to move forward a great deal. The same kinds of points that were made in the 1960s were being rehashed in the late 1990s and at the start of the present century. One thing that *has* changed is that ethical issues are nowadays more central to discussions about research than ever before. This may be due to a greater sensitivity to ethical issues, but it is also to do with a greater concern among representatives of universities, research funding bodies, and professional associations to exhibit good ethical credentials. One social scientist has turned sociological thinking onto the current research environment by suggesting that concerns about ethical issues today have the characteristics of a 'moral panic' (Van den Hoonaard 2001).
3. Debates about ethics have often accompanied well-known, not to say notorious, cases of alleged ethical transgression. They include: the study of a religious cult by a group of disguised researchers (Festinger et al. 1956); the use of pseudo-patients in the study of mental hospitals (Rosenhan 1973; Research in focus 12.5); Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) field experiment to study teacher expectations in the classroom (Research in focus 3.1); and Holdaway's (1982, 1983; Research in focus 3.14) covert ethnography of a police force. The problem with this emphasis on notoriety is that it can be taken to imply that ethical concerns reside only in such extreme cases, when in fact the potential for ethical transgression is much more general than this. See Research in focus 6.1 and 6.2 for two cases that have acquired a celebrated status for

their notoriety. It is striking that the research referred to in Research in focus 6.1 and 6.2 relates to investigations that occurred some decades ago. One of the reasons that authors (like me!) keep returning to these two cases is partly to do with the starkness of their ethical transgressions, but it is also to do with the fact that it would be difficult and most probably impossible to find such clear-cut cases of bad ethical practices in more recent years. That is a product of the greater ethical awareness among social researchers as well as the greater significance of ethical guidelines and research ethics committees nowadays. That it is not to say that research like Humphreys's in Research in focus 6.1 or Milgram's in Research in focus 6.2 is inconceivable today, but that it is a lot less likely to occur. However, Research in focus 6.2 includes a partial replication of the Milgram experiment.

4. Related to this last point is the fact that these extreme and notorious cases of ethical violation tend to be associated with particular research methods—notably disguised observation and the use of deception in experiments. Again, the problem with this association of ethics with certain studies (and methods) is that it implies that ethical concerns only or even primarily reside in some methods but not others. As a result, the impression can be gleaned that other methods, such as questionnaires or overt observation, are immune from ethical problems. That is not the case. For example, conducting questionnaire or overt observation research with children will raise a lot of ethical issues that may not be the case when the research is on adults.



Research in focus 6.1

The infamous case of the sociologist as voyeur

An investigation that has almost achieved particular notoriety because of its ethics (or lack of them, some might argue) is Humphreys's (1970) infamous study of homosexual encounters in public toilets ('tearoom trade'). Humphreys's research interest was in impersonal sex, and, in order to shed light on this area, he took on the role of 'watchqueen'—that is, someone who watches out for possible intruders while men meet and engage in homosexual sex in public toilets. As a result of his involvement in these social scenes, Humphreys was able to collect the details of active participants' car licence numbers. He was then able to track down their names and addresses and ended up with a sample of 100 active tearoom-trade participants. He then conducted an interview survey of a sample of those who had been identified and of a further sample that acted as a point of comparison. The interview schedule was concerned with health issues and included some questions about marital sex. In order to reduce the risk of being remembered, Humphreys waited a year before contacting his respondents and also changed his hair style.



Research in focus 6.2

The infamous case of the psychologist as Nazi concentration camp commandant

Milgram (1963) was concerned with the circumstances associated with the use of brutality in the Nazi concentration camps of the Second World War. In particular, he was interested in the processes whereby a person can be induced to cause extreme harm to another by virtue of being ordered to do so. To investigate this issue further, Milgram devised a laboratory experiment. Volunteers were recruited to act out the role of teachers who punished learners (who were accomplices of the experimenter) by submitting them to electric shocks when they gave incorrect answers to questions. The shocks were not, of course, real, but the teachers/volunteers were not aware of this. The level of electric shock was gradually increased with successive incorrect answers, until the teacher/volunteer refused to administer more shocks. Learners had been trained to respond to the rising level of electric shock with simulated but appropriate howls of pain. In the room was a further accomplice of Milgram's who cajoled the teacher/volunteer to continue to administer shocks, suggesting that it was part of the study's requirements to continue and that they were not causing permanent harm, in spite of the increasingly shrill cries of pain. Milgram's study shows that people can be induced to cause very considerable pain to others, and as such he saw it as shedding light on the circumstances leading to the horrors of the concentration camp.

The obedience study raises complex ethical issues, particularly in relation to the potential harm incurred by participants as a result of the experiments. It is worth noting that it was conducted over thirty years ago and it is extremely unlikely that it would be considered acceptable to a university human subjects committee or indeed to most social researchers today. However, in 2006 Burger (2009) conducted what he refers to as a 'partial replication' of the Milgram experiment. Burger hypothesized that there would be little or no difference between Milgram's findings and his own some forty-five years later. The replication is 'partial' for several reasons such as: participants did not proceed beyond the lowest simulated voltage level that Milgram used (150 volts; 79 per cent of Milgram's teachers went beyond this point); participants were intensively screened for emotional and psychological problems and excluded if there was evidence of such problems; people who had studied some psychology were excluded (because the Milgram studies are so well known); and participants of all adult ages were included rather than up to the age of 50, as in the original studies. Burger also reckons that his sample was more ethnically diverse than Milgram's would have been. The replication had to be partial, because, as Burger puts it, 'current standards for the ethical treatment of participants clearly place Milgram's studies out of bounds' (Burger 2009: 2). Burger found that the propensity for obedience was only slightly lower than forty-five years previously, though, as A. G. Miller (2009) observes, the adjustments Burger had to make probably render comparisons with Milgram's findings questionable.

Researchers' ethical qualms do not extend to television, however. In March 2010, newspapers reported a French documentary based on a supposed game show called *Game of Death* and broadcast on prime-time television. Eighty contestants signed contracts agreeing to inflict electric shocks on other participants. Shocks were administered when the other contestant failed to answer a question correctly. The shocks continued up to the highest voltage, with the contestants being egged on by an audience and a presenter. Only sixteen contestants stopped before administering the highest shock level, which would have been fatal. As in the Milgram experiment, the participants receiving the shocks were actors who simulated howls of agony and the shocks themselves were of course also fake. An account of this programme, which refers to Milgram, can be found at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8573756.stm> www.independent.co.uk/news/media/tv-radio/the-evil-that-reality-television-contestants-do-1923218.html

Also, the following is a CNN news item on the programme that includes some brief footage as well as a brief commentary from Burger, who carried out the aforementioned partial replication: www.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/bestoftv/2010/03/17/cb.game.show.death.cnn.html

Footage from the original Milgram experiments can be found on YouTube and make fascinating viewing (e.g. www.youtube.com/watch?v=4C5Y8xG1l6A).

All these websites were accessed on 5 August 2010.

In this chapter, I will introduce the main ethical issues and debates about ethics. I am not going to try to resolve them, because they are not readily capable of resolution. This is why the ethical debate has scarcely moved on since the 1960s. What is crucial is to be aware of the ethical principles involved and of the nature of the concerns about ethics in social research. It is only if researchers are aware of the issues involved that they can make informed decisions about the implications of certain choices. If nothing else, you should be aware of the possible opprobrium that will be coming your way if you make certain kinds of choice. My chief concern lies with the ethical

issues that arise in relations between researchers and research participants in the course of an investigation. This focus by no means exhausts the range of ethical issues and dilemmas that arise, such as those that might arise in relation to the funding of social research or how findings are used by non-researchers. However, the ethical issues that arise in the course of doing research are the ones that are most likely to impinge on students. Writers on research ethics adopt different stances concerning the ethical issues that arise in connection with relationships between researchers and research participants. Key concept 6.1 outlines some of these stances.



Key concept 6.1 Stances on ethics

Authors on social research ethics can be characterized in terms of the stances they take on the issue. The following stances can be distinguished.

- *Universalism.* A universalist stance takes the view that ethical precepts should never be broken. Infractions of ethical principles are wrong in a moral sense and are damaging to social research. This kind of stance can be seen in the writings of Erikson (1967), Dingwall (1980), and Bulmer (1982). Bulmer does, however, point to some forms of what appears to be disguised observation that may be acceptable. One is retrospective covert observation, which occurs when a researcher writes up his or her experiences in social settings in which he or she participated but not as a researcher. An example would be Van Maanen (1991b), who wrote up his experiences as a ride operator in Disneyland many years after he had been employed there in vacation jobs. Even a universalist like Erikson (1967: 372) recognizes that it 'would be absurd . . . to insist as a point of ethics that sociologists should always introduce themselves as investigators everywhere they go and should inform every person who figures in their thinking exactly what their research is all about'.
- *Situation ethics.* E. Goode (1996) has argued for deception to be considered on a case-by-case basis. In other words, he argues for what Fletcher (1966: 31) has called a 'situation ethics', or more specifically 'principled relativism', which can be contrasted with the universalist ethics of some writers. This argument has two ways of being represented.
 1. *The end justifies the means.* Some writers argue that, unless there is some breaking of ethical rules, we would never know about certain social phenomena. Fielding (1982) essentially argues for this position in relation to his research on the National Front, an extreme right-wing organization that was becoming politically influential in the 1970s. Without some kind of disguised observation, this important movement and its appeal would not have been studied. Similarly, for their covert participant observation study of websites supportive of individuals with eating disorders (known as 'pro-ana' websites—see Research in focus 28.4), Brotsky and Giles (2007: 96) argue that deception was justified, 'given the charges laid against the pro-ana community (that they are effectively sanctioning self-starvation), and the potential benefit of our findings to the eating disorders clinical field'. This kind of argument is usually linked to the second form of a situationist argument in relation to social research ethics.
 2. *No choice.* It is often suggested that we have no choice but to dissemble on occasions if we want to investigate the issues in which we are interested. This view can be discerned in the writings of Holdaway (1982) and Homan (Homan and Bulmer 1982). For example, Brotsky and Giles (2007: 96) write: 'it was felt highly unlikely that access would be granted to a researcher openly disclosing the purpose of her study'.

- *Ethical transgression is pervasive.* It is often observed that virtually all research involves elements that are at least ethically questionable. This occurs whenever participants are not given absolutely all the details on a piece of research, or when there is variation in the amount of knowledge about research. Punch (1994: 91), for example, observes that 'some dissimulation is intrinsic to social life and, therefore, to fieldwork'. He quotes Gans (1962: 44) in support of this point: 'If the researcher is completely honest with people about his activities, they will try to hide actions and attitudes they consider undesirable, and so will be dishonest. Consequently, the researcher must be dishonest to get honest data.'
- *Anything goes (more or less).* The writers associated with arguments relating to situation ethics and a recognition of the pervasiveness of ethical transgressions are arguing not for an 'anything-goes' mentality, but for a certain amount of flexibility in ethical decision-making. However, Douglas (1976) has argued that the kinds of deception in which social researchers engage are trivial compared to those perpetrated by powerful institutions in modern society (such as the mass media, the police, and industry). His book is an inventory of tactics for deceiving people so that their trust is gained and they reveal themselves to the researcher. Very few researchers subscribe to this stance. Denzin (1968) comes close to an anything-goes stance when he suggests that social researchers are entitled to study anyone in any setting provided the work has a 'scientific' purpose, does not harm participants, and does not deliberately damage the discipline.
- *Deontological versus consequentialist ethics.* Another distinction that has attracted interest in recent years is between deontological and consequentialist ethics. Deontological ethics considers certain acts as wrong (or good) in and of themselves. Consequentialist ethics looks at the consequences of an act for guidance as to whether it is right or wrong. In relation to the consideration of ethical issues in social research, deontological arguments tend to prevail—in terms of the issues covered below, deceiving research participants or *not* providing them with the opportunity for informed consent is regarded as ethically wrong. Consequentialist arguments do sometimes surface, however. For example, you sometimes see the argument that an activity like covert observation is wrong because it can harm the reputation of the profession of social research or of an organization. As such, other social researchers would be adversely affected by the ethically dubious decision to engage in covert observation.



Tips and skills

Ethics committees

In addition to needing to be familiar with the codes of practice produced by several professional associations such as the British Sociological Association, the American Sociological Association, and the Social Research Association, you should be acquainted with the ethical guidelines of your university or college. Most higher education organizations have ethics committees that issue guidelines about ethical practice. These guidelines are often based on or influenced by the codes developed by professional associations. Universities' and colleges' guidelines will provide indications of what are considered ethically unacceptable practices. Sometimes you will need to submit your proposed research to an ethics committee of your university or college. This is likely to occur if there is some uncertainty about whether your proposed research is likely to be in breach of the guidelines or if you want to go ahead with research that you know is ethically dubious but you wish to obtain permission to do it anyway.

The ethical guidelines and the ethics committee are there to protect research participants, but they are also involved in protecting institutions, so that researchers will be deterred from behaving in ethically unacceptable ways that might rebound on institutions. Such behaviour could cause problems for institutions if ethically inappropriate behaviour gave rise to legal action against them or to adverse publicity. However, ethics committees and their guidelines are there to help and protect researchers too, so that they are less likely to conduct research that could damage their reputations.

One of the main approaches used by ethics committees is to ask researchers to indicate whether their research entails certain procedures or activities (which are often derived from professional guidelines such as the BSA's *Statement of Ethical Practice* or the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s *Framework for Research Ethics (FRE)* (see Tips and skills 'The ESRC's *Framework for Research Ethics*' below)), such as disguised observation, so that effectively they self-declare whether they are likely to engage in ethically dubious practices. This process usually entails completing a form to show that you have considered potential ethical issues that might arise from your study. This form is likely to ask questions such as 'Will there be any potential harm, discomfort, physical or psychological risks for research participants?' and the researcher needs to answer 'Yes' or 'No'. If there is a possibility that you may engage in such a practice, the proposed research is then 'flagged' for full scrutiny by the ethics committee. In such an instance, the researcher is required to provide a full account of the research and the rationale for using the ethically dubious practice(s). This can slow down research a great deal and can of course result in the committee refusing to allow it to proceed.

In recent years, research ethics committees (often called Institutional Review Boards in the USA) have become quite controversial. Some writers see them as too influenced by a natural science model of the research process and as therefore inimical to social research and to qualitative research in particular (Lincoln and Tierney 2004). Further, they are sometimes seen as having gone too far in terms of their role of protecting institutions from litigious disgruntled research participants (Van Den Hoonaard 2001). Further, it has been suggested that they divert attention from the need to be constantly vigilant for ethical problems that might arise in the course of doing research (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). In other words, there is a concern that, once the researcher has jumped over the bureaucratic hurdle of the ethics committee, he or she may feel that the ethical issues have been covered. This is clearly not the case, as ethical issues can and invariably do arise at all stages of the research process.



Ethical principles

Discussions about ethical principles in social research, and perhaps more specifically transgressions of them, tend to revolve around certain issues that recur in different guises, but they have been usefully broken down by Diener and Crandall (1978) into four main areas:

1. whether there is *harm to participants*;
2. whether there is a *lack of informed consent*;
3. whether there is an *invasion of privacy*;
4. whether *deception* is involved.

I will look at each of these in turn, but it should be appreciated that these four principles overlap somewhat. For example, it is difficult to imagine how the principle of informed consent could be built into an investigation in which research participants were deceived. However, there is no doubt that these four areas form a useful classification of ethical principles in and for social research.

Harm to participants

Research that is likely to harm participants is regarded by most people as unacceptable. But what is harm? Harm can entail a number of facets: physical harm; harm to participants' development; loss of self-esteem; stress; and 'inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts', as Diener and Crandall (1978: 19) put it. In several studies that we have encountered in this book, there has been real or potential harm to participants.

- In the Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) study (Research in focus 3.2), it is at least possible that the pupils who had not been identified as 'spurters' who would excel in their studies were adversely affected in their intellectual development by the greater attention received by the spurters.
- In the Festinger et al. (1956) study of a religious cult, it is quite likely that the fact that the researchers

joined the group at a crucial time—close to the projected end of the world—fuelled the delusions of group members.

- Many of the participants in the Milgram (1963) experiment on obedience to authority (Research in focus 6.2) experienced high levels of stress and anxiety as a consequence of being incited to administer electric shocks. It could also be argued that Milgram's observers were 'inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts'.
- Many of the participants in Humphreys's (1970) research (see Research in focus 6.1) were married men who are likely to have been fearful of detection as practising homosexuals. It is not inconceivable that his methods could have resulted in some of them becoming identified against their will.

The BSA *Statement of Ethical Practice* enjoins researchers to 'anticipate, and to guard against, consequences for research participants which can be predicted to be harmful' and 'to consider carefully the possibility that the research experience may be a disturbing one'. Similar sentiments are expressed by the SRA's *Ethical Guidelines*, for example, when it is advocated that the 'social researcher should try to minimize disturbance both to subjects themselves and to the subjects' relationships with their environment'.

The issue of harm to participants is further addressed in ethical codes by advocating care over maintaining the confidentiality of records. This means that the identities and records of individuals should be maintained as confidential. This injunction also means that care needs to be taken when findings are being published to ensure that individuals are not identified or identifiable. The case of a study of an American town, Springdale (a pseudonym), by Vidich and Bensman (1968) is instructive in this regard. The research was based on Vidich's participant observation within the town for over two years. The published book on the research was uncomplimentary about the town and many of its leaders and was written in what many people felt was a rather patronizing tone. To make matters worse, it was possible to identify individuals through the published account. The town's inhabitants responded with a Fourth of July Parade in which many of the inhabitants wore badges with their pseudonyms, and an effigy of Vidich was set up so that it was peering into manure. The townspeople also responded by announcing their refusal to cooperate in any more social research. The inhabitants were clearly upset by the publication and to that extent were harmed by it. This example also

touches on the issue of privacy, which will be addressed below.

As this last case suggests, the issue of confidentiality raises particular difficulties for many forms of qualitative research. In quantitative research, it is relatively easy to make records anonymous and to report findings in a way that does not allow individuals to be identified. However, this is often less easy with qualitative research, where particular care has to be taken with regard to the possible identification of persons and places. The use of pseudonyms is a common recourse, but may not eliminate entirely the possibility of identification. This issue raises particular problems with regard to the secondary analysis of qualitative data (see Chapter 24), since it is very difficult, though by no means impossible, to present **field notes** and interview transcripts in a way that will prevent people and places from being identified. As Alderson (1998) has suggested, the difficulty is one of being able to ensure that the same safeguards concerning confidentiality can be guaranteed when secondary analysts examine such records as those provided by the original primary researcher.

A further area of ethical consideration relates to the possibility of harm to the researcher, an issue that was introduced in Tips and skills 'Safety in research' (see Chapter 4). In other words, the person seeking clearance for their research from an ethics committee may be encouraged to consider the possibility of physical or emotional harm through exposure to a fieldwork setting. Even if such a consideration is not stipulated in an ethics form, it is something that you should consider very seriously.

The need for confidentiality can present dilemmas for researchers. Westmarland (2001) has discussed the dilemmas she faced when observing violence by the police towards people being held in custody. She argues that, while a certain level of violence might be deemed acceptable, in part to protect the officers themselves and the public, there is an issue of at what point it is no longer acceptable and the researcher needs to inform on those involved. Moreover, such a reasonable level of violence may be consistent with the police occupational culture. The problem for the ethnographer is compounded by the fact that blowing the whistle on violence may result in a loss of the researcher's credibility among officers, premature termination of the investigation, or inability to gain access in the future. In the process, career issues are brought to the fore for the researcher, which connects with the discussion of political issues



Tips and skills

Data protection

One aspect of confidentiality and the management of it is that, in the UK, the Data Protection Act (1998) confers obligations on people and organizations who hold personal data on others and it confers rights on those about whom such information is held. The Information Commissioner's website points out the following about the Act:

Firstly, it [the Data Protection Act] states that anyone who processes personal information must comply with eight principles, which make sure that personal information is:

- Fairly and lawfully processed
- Processed for limited purposes
- Adequate, relevant and not excessive
- Accurate and up to date
- Not kept for longer than is necessary
- Processed in line with your rights
- Secure
- Not transferred to other countries without adequate protection

The second area covered by the Act provides individuals with important rights, including the right to find out what personal information is held on computer and most paper records.

(www.ico.gov.uk/what_we_cover/data_protection/the_basics.aspx (accessed 5 August 2010))

These principles are important to bear in mind, as it is clear that it is easy to fall foul of them when conducting social research. However, Section 33 of the Act effectively exempts personal information collected for research purposes from some of these principles. According to this section, the researcher must ensure that 'the data are not processed to support measures or decisions with respect to particular individuals' and that 'the data are not processed in such a way that substantial damage or substantial distress is, or is likely to be, caused to any data subject' (www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/section/33 (accessed 5 July 2011)). Also important is that it is stipulated that research is exempt only if 'the results of the research or any resulting statistics are not made available in a form that identifies data subjects or any of them' (www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/section/33 (accessed 5 July 2011)). This stipulation again points to the importance of ensuring that confidentiality is ensured and that individuals are not identifiable.

Responsibilities of researchers with respect to confidentiality are also laid down in the *Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care (RGF)* of 2006. The RGF is concerned to provide a framework for research in the fields of health and social care that reduces risks and ensures the well-being of research participants. The RGF is meant to cover all research that takes place in organizations like hospitals or social care agencies and as such includes any social research that takes place in such locations. For example, it is stipulated in Section 3.6.1 that researchers are responsible for 'protecting the integrity and confidentiality of clinical and other records and data generated by the research' (www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/12/24/27/04122427.pdf (accessed 5 August 2010)).

Holmes (2004) provides some important and useful suggestions about how to protect confidentiality and participants' data. Her tips include:

- not storing participants' names and addresses or letter correspondence on hard drives;
- using identifier codes on data files and storing the list of participants and their identifier codes separately in a locked cabinet;
- ensuring that transcribers sign a letter saying they will conform to the Data Protection Act;
- ensuring transcripts do not include participants' names;
- keeping copies of transcripts in a locked cabinet.

The central point of this Tips and skills feature is to reinforce the point that there is an environment that takes confidentiality and data protection issues very seriously and that it is important for students and researchers generally to be attuned to their obligations and what is required of them.

towards the end of this chapter. Similarly, in a feminist study of girls' experiences of violence, Burman et al. (2001: 455) encountered some distressing revelations that prompted them to ask 'exactly what, and how much, should be disclosed, to whom, and how should this be done'. Thus, the important injunction to protect confidentiality may create dilemmas for the researcher that are by no means easy to resolve.

The issue of confidentiality is clearly a very important one in its own right. Israel and Hay (2004) treat it as a separate principle of ethics in its own right. As they observe, if researchers do not observe the confidentiality of what is said to them, 'who would talk to them in the future?' (Israel and Hay 2004: 94). Thus, quite aside from the intrinsic wrongness of not keeping confidences, there is the consequentialist argument that it could harm generations of future researchers.

One of the problems with the harm-to-participants principle is that it is not possible to identify in all circumstances whether harm is likely, though that fact should not be taken to mean that there is no point in seeking to protect them from harm. Kimmel (1988) notes in this connection the example of the Cambridge–Summerville Youth Study. In 1939 an experiment was conducted on boys aged 5–13 who were either identified as likely to become delinquent or were average in this regard. The 506 boys were equally divided in terms of this characteristic. They were randomly assigned either to an experimental group in which they received preventative counselling or to a no-treatment control group. In the mid-1970s the records were re-examined and were quite shocking: 'Treated subjects were more likely than controls to evidence signs of alcoholism and serious mental illness, died at a younger age, suffered from more stress-related diseases, tended to be employed in lower-prestige occupations, and were more likely to commit second crimes' (Kimmel 1988: 19).

In other words, the treatment brought about a train of negative consequences for the group. This is an extreme example and relates to experimental research, which is not a research design that is commonly employed in social research (see Chapter 3), but it does illustrate the difficulty of anticipating harm to respondents. The *ASA Code of Ethics* suggests that, if there is any prospect of harm to participants, informed consent, the focus of the next section, is essential: 'Informed consent must be obtained when the risks of research are greater than the risks of everyday life. Where modest risk or harm is anticipated, informed consent must be obtained.'

Lack of informed consent

The issue of informed consent is in many respects the area within social research ethics that is most hotly debated. The bulk of the discussion tends to focus on what is variously called disguised or covert observation. Such observation can involve covert participant observation (Key concept 19.2), or simple or contrived observation (Key concept 14.3), in which the researcher's true identity is unknown. The principle means that prospective research participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study. Covert observation transgresses that principle, because participants are not given the opportunity to refuse to cooperate. They are involved, whether they like it or not.

Lack of informed consent is a feature of the research in Research in focus 6.1 and 6.2. In Humphreys's research informed consent is absent, because the men for whom he acted as a watchqueen were not given the opportunity to refuse participation in his investigation. Similar points can be made about several other studies encountered in this book, such as Festinger et al. (1956), Patrick (1973), Holdaway (1982, 1983), Winlow et al. (2001), Brotsky and Giles (2007), and Pearson (2009). The principle of informed consent also entails the implication that, even when people know they are being asked to participate in research, they should be fully informed about the research process. As the *SRA Ethical Guidelines* suggests:

Inquiries involving human subjects should be based as far as practicable on the freely given informed consent of subjects. Even if participation is required by law, it should still be as informed as possible. In voluntary inquiries, subjects should not be under the impression that they are required to participate. They should be aware of their entitlement to refuse at any stage for whatever reason and to withdraw data just supplied. Information that would be likely to affect a subject's willingness to participate should not be deliberately withheld, since this would remove from subjects an important means of protecting their own interests.

Similarly, the *BSA Statement* says:

As far as possible participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain as fully as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be promoted.

Thus, while Milgram's experimental subjects were volunteers and therefore knew they were going to participate in research, there is a lack of informed consent, because they were not given full information about the nature of the research and its possible implications for them.

However, as Homan (1991: 73) has observed, implementing the principle of informed consent 'is easier said than done'. At least two major points stand out here.

- It is extremely difficult to present prospective participants with absolutely all the information that might be required for them to make an informed decision about their involvement. In fact, relatively minor transgressions probably pervade most social research, such as deliberately underestimating the amount of time that an interview is likely to take so that people are not put off being interviewed and not giving absolutely all the details about one's research for fear of contaminating people's answers to questions.
- In ethnographic research, the researcher is likely to come into contact with a wide spectrum of people, and ensuring that absolutely everyone has the opportunity for informed consent is not practicable, because it would be extremely disruptive in everyday contexts. For example, in the passage from Punch's field notes in *Research in focus* 19.6, the meandering cyclist could not be given the opportunity for informed consent. Punch was not a disguised participant observer so far as the police were concerned, but was disguised in connection with many of those with whom the police had encounters in the course of his fieldwork. Also, even when all research participants in a certain setting are aware that the ethnographer is a researcher, it is doubtful whether they are all similarly (let alone identically) informed about the nature of the research.

In spite of the widespread condemnation of violations of informed consent and the view that covert observation

is especially vulnerable to accusations of unethical practice in this regard, studies using the method still appear periodically (e.g. Brotsky and Giles 2007; Pearson 2009). The defence is usually of the 'end-justifies-the-means' kind, which is further discussed below. What is interesting in this present context is that the *BSA Statement* essentially leaves the door ajar for covert observation. The phrase 'as far as possible' regarding informed consent in the last quotation from the *Statement* does this, but the *BSA* then goes even further in relation to **covert research**:

There are serious ethical and legal issues in the use of covert research but the use of covert methods may be justified in certain circumstances. For example, difficulties arise when research participants change their behaviour because they know they are being studied. Researchers may also face problems when access to spheres of social life is closed to social scientists by powerful or secretive interests. . . . However, covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied. Participant or non-participant observation in non-public spaces or experimental manipulation of research participants without their knowledge should be resorted to only where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data. . . . In such studies it is important to safeguard the anonymity of research participants. Ideally, where informed consent has not been obtained prior to the research it should be obtained post-hoc.

While this statement hardly condones the absence of informed consent associated with covert research, it is not unequivocally censorious either. It recognizes that covert research 'may avoid certain problems' and refers, without using the term, to the possibility of reactivity associated with overt observational methods. It also recognizes that covert methods can help to get over the difficulty of gaining access to certain kinds of setting. The passage entails an acknowledgement that informed consent is jeopardized, along with the privacy principle (see below), but implies that covert research can be used 'where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data'. The difficulty here clearly is how a researcher is to decide whether it is in fact impossible to obtain data other than by covert work. Similarly, in the ESRC's *Framework for Research Ethics* (see Tips and Skills

'The ESRC's *Framework for Research Ethics*' below), it is proposed: 'Deception (i.e. research without consent) should only be used as a last resort when no other approach is possible.'

I suspect that, by and large, covert observers typically make their judgements in this connection on the basis of the *anticipated* difficulty of gaining access to a setting or of encountering reactivity problems, rather than as a response to difficulties they have actually experienced. For example, Holdaway (1982: 63) has written that, as a police officer, his only alternatives to covert participant observation were either equally unethical (but less desirable) or 'unrealistic'. Similarly, Homan justified his use of covert participant observation of a religious sect on the grounds that sociologists were viewed very negatively by group members and therefore 'it seemed probable that the prevalence of such a perception would prejudice the effectiveness of a fieldworker declaring an identity as sociologist' (Homan and Bulmer 1982: 107). Pearson (2009) writes that he employed covert participant observation for a study of football hooliganism because his early attempts to conduct the research by interview proved unreliable: hardcore violent hooligans played down their involvement, whereas non-violent ones exaggerated theirs. The issue of the circumstances in which violations of ethical principles, like informed consent, are deemed acceptable will reappear in the discussion below. It also has to be recognized that covert participant observation can cause difficulties for researchers because of their need to be consistent in the persona they project. Pearson (2009) felt that he had to engage in criminal acts in order to sustain his research and his identity among the hooligans with whom he consorted. He writes:

On one occasion, for example, when I believed it necessary to prove my reliability to the subjects, I individually confronted a small group of rival supporters in a public house. The attempt was purely 'for show' as I predicted the group would intervene and prevent any serious physical confrontation. Nonetheless, the action was both criminal (threatening behaviour) and in the short term seriously distorted the field. My justification for this action at the time was that it enhanced my position in the field and I was accepted for the remainder of the season as one of the 'hardcore' despite my continual 'opting out' of more serious offences. (Pearson 2009: 248–9)

The principle of informed consent is also bound up to some extent with the issue of harm to participants. Erikson (1967) has suggested that, if the principle is not followed and if participants are harmed as a result of the research, the investigator is more culpable than if they did not know. For example, he writes: 'If we happen to harm people who have agreed to act as subjects, we can at least argue that they knew something of the risks involved . . .' (Erikson 1967: 369). While this might seem like a recipe for seeking a salve for the sociologist's conscience, it does point to an important issue—namely, that the social researcher is more likely to be vilified if participants are adversely affected when they were not willing accomplices than when they were. However, it is debatable whether that means that the researcher is any less culpable for that harm. Erikson implies they are less culpable, but this is a potential area for disagreement.

Informed consent forms

Increasingly, researchers prefer to obtain the informed consent of research participants by getting them to sign informed consent forms. The advantage of such forms is that they give respondents the opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their participation at the outset. Further, the researcher has a signed record of consent if any concerns are subsequently raised by participants or others. The chief possible problem is that the requirement to sign the form may prompt rather than alleviate concerns on the part of prospective participants, so that they end up declining to be involved. Also, the direction of qualitative studies can be somewhat less predictable than with quantitative ones, so it is difficult to be specific within forms about some issues. Tips and Skills 'A sample interview consent form' and 'A sample study information sheet' provide an indication of the kinds of features that might be taken into account in seeking participants' informed consent. There is very useful advice on consent forms and other aspects of ethical practice in relation to research at:

www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/ (accessed 9 August 2010)
www.lancaster.ac.uk/researchethics/index.html
 (accessed 9 August 2010)



Tips and skills

A sample interview consent form

- I, the undersigned, have read and understood the Study Information Sheet provided. . . .
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the Study.
- I understand that taking part in the Study will include being interviewed and audio recorded.
- I have been given adequate time to consider my decision and I agree to take part in the Study.
- I understand that my personal details such as name and employer address will not be revealed to people outside the project.
- I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs but my name will not be used.
- I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any material related to this project to [name of researcher].
- I understand that I can withdraw from the Study at any time and I will not be asked any questions about why I no longer want to take part.

Name of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

[Based on examples from UK Data Archive (2009) and several UK universities]



Tips and skills

A sample study information sheet

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study. This Information Sheet explains what the study is about and how we would like you to take part in it.

The purpose of the study is to [give a short explanation of the study].

In order to elicit your views, we would like you to be interviewed by one of the researchers involved in the Study at the University of [University name]. If you agree to this, the interview will be audio recorded and will last approximately one hour. You will also be asked to keep a workplace diary for four weeks. For you to take part in this aspect of the Study the consent of your line manager will be required. Details of how to go about this will be given when you attend for interview.

The information provided by you in the interview and workplace diary will be used for research purposes. It will not be used in a manner which would allow identification of your individual responses.

At the end of the Study, anonymised research data will be archived at the UK Data Archive in order to make it available to other researchers in line with current data-sharing practices.

The study has been considered by an Institutional Ethics Committee at the University of [University name] and has been given a favourable review.

All reasonable travel and subsistence expenses that you incur through taking part in the Study will be reimbursed, but please keep all receipts.

Once again, we would like to thank you for agreeing to take part in this Study. If you have any questions about the research at any stage, please do not hesitate to contact us.

[Researcher contact addresses, telephone, email addresses]



Student experience

Informed consent forms

For Rebecca Barnes, 'ethical issues were a paramount concern, especially given the extremely sensitive and emotive nature of the topic'. She designed a participant information sheet and a consent form 'in order to make participants aware of their rights, and to advise them of the possible negative consequences of participating in the research'. Erin Sanders writes that she did not develop a consent form:

because the women I interviewed didn't read English and I can't write in Thai, I didn't have a signed consent form. I was able to get verbal consent—but now I feel it might have been better to have a document translated into Thai—so that they understood the research—but also understood their rights and the steps that would be taken to safeguard their identities.



To read more about Rebecca's and Erin's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Invasion of privacy

This third area of ethical concern relates to the issue of the degree to which invasions of privacy can be condoned. The right to privacy is a tenet that many of us hold dear, and transgressions of that right in the name of research are not regarded as acceptable. It is very much linked to the notion of informed consent, because, to the degree that informed consent is given on the basis of a detailed understanding of what the research participant's involvement is likely to entail, he or she in a sense acknowledges that the right to privacy has been surrendered for that limited domain. The *BSA Statement* makes a direct link in the passage quoted on page 139 when it suggests: 'covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied.' Of course, the research participant does

not abrogate the right to privacy entirely by providing informed consent. For example, when people agree to be interviewed, they will frequently refuse to answer certain questions on whatever grounds they feel are justified. Often, these refusals will be based on a feeling that certain questions delve into private realms, which respondents do not wish to make public, regardless of the fact that the interview is in private. Examples might be questions about income, religious beliefs, or sexual activities.

Covert methods are usually deemed to be violations of the privacy principle on the grounds that participants are not being given the opportunity to refuse invasions of their privacy. Such methods also mean that they might reveal confidences or information that they would not have revealed if they had known about the status of the confidant as researcher. The issue of privacy is invariably linked to issues of anonymity and confidentiality in the



Student experience

Anonymity and confidentiality

Rebecca Barnes writes that, in the participant information sheet she prepared, she stopped short of *guaranteeing* anonymity and confidentiality.

I assured participants that I would do my utmost to uphold confidentiality and anonymity, but I was cautious about guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity. Factors outside a researcher's control such as theft of confidential documents make such guarantees misleading. Nonetheless, I did do everything that I could to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, such as using pseudonyms in transcripts and beyond; storing interview tapes, transcripts, and participants' contact details separately. Also, when I transcribed the interviews, I altered specific details that could make a participant identifiable, such as the area in which they live, their occupation, and other details such as pubs or nightclubs that participants referred to. I ensured that the details that I changed did not change the meaning of participants' words in any way.



To read more about Rebecca's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

research process, an area that has already been touched on in the context of the question of whether harm comes to participants. The *BSA Statement* forges this kind of connection: 'The anonymity and privacy of those who participate in the research process should be respected. Personal information concerning research participants should be kept confidential. In some cases it may be necessary to decide whether it is proper or appropriate to record certain kinds of sensitive information.'

Raising issues about ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in relation to the recording of information and the maintenance of records relates to all methods of social research. In other words, while covert research may pose certain kinds of problem regarding the invasion of privacy, other methods of social research are implicated in possible difficulties in connection with anonymity and confidentiality. This was clearly the case with the Springfield research (Vidich and Bensman 1968), which was based on open participant observation. The issue here was that the absence of safeguards concerning the protection of the identity of some members of the community meant that certain matters about them came into the public domain that should have remained private.

Deception

Deception occurs when researchers represent their work as something other than what it is. The experiment by Milgram referred to in Research in focus 6.2 involved deception. Participants are led to believe they are administering real electric shocks. Deception in various degrees is probably quite widespread in such research, because researchers often want to limit participants' understanding of what the research is about so that they respond more naturally to the experimental treatment.

However, deception is by no means the exclusive preserve of social psychology experiments. E. Goode (1996), for example, placed four fake and slightly different dating advertisements in periodicals. He received nearly 1,000 replies and was able to conduct a content analysis of them. Several of the studies referred to in this book entail deception: Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) deceived teachers into believing that particular children in their charge were likely to excel at school, when they had in

fact been randomly selected; Festinger et al. (1956) deceived cult members that they were in fact real converts; Rosenhan's (1973) associates deceived admissions staff at mental hospitals that they were mentally ill; Holdaway (1982) deceived his superiors and peers that he was functioning solely as a police officer; and Brotsky (Brotsky and Giles 2007) posed as an anorexic and posted messages onto a 'pro-ana' website on that basis.

The ethical objection to deception seems to turn on two points. First, it is not a nice thing to do. While the *SRA Guidelines* recognizes that deception is widespread in social interaction, it is hardly desirable. Second, there is the question of professional self-interest. If social researchers became known as snoopers who deceived people as a matter of professional course, the image of our work would be adversely affected and we might experience difficulty in gaining financial support and the cooperation of future prospective research participants. As the *SRA Guidelines* puts it: 'It remains the duty of social researchers and their collaborators, however, not to pursue methods of inquiry that are likely to infringe human values and sensibilities. To do so, whatever the methodological advantages, would be to endanger the reputation of social research and the mutual trust between social researchers and society which is a prerequisite for much research.' Similarly, Erikson (1967: 369) has argued that disguised observation 'is liable to damage the reputation of sociology in the larger society and close off promising areas of research for future investigators'.

One of the chief problems with the discussion of this aspect of ethics is that deception is, as some writers observe, widespread in social research (see the stance 'Ethical transgression is pervasive' in Key concept 6.1). It is rarely feasible or desirable to provide participants with a totally complete account of what your research is about. As Punch (1979) found in the incident that is referred to in Research in focus 19.6, he could hardly announce to the youth or the meandering cyclist that he was not in fact a police officer and then launch into a lengthy account of his research. Bulmer (1982), whose stance is predominantly that of a universalist in ethics terms (see Key concept 6.1), nonetheless recognizes that there are bound to be instances such as this and deems them justifiable. However, it is very difficult to know where the line should be drawn here.



Ethics and the issue of quality

Possibly one of the most interesting developments in connection with ethical issues is that a criterion of the ethical

integrity of an investigation is its *quality*. For example, the ESRC's *FRE* states as the first of six principles that

'Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency' (*FRE*, p. 3). See Tips and skills 'The ESRC's *Framework for Research Ethics*' below for more on this set of guidelines. Similarly, a list of criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research studies includes the criterion 'Evidence of consideration of ethical issues' (Spencer et al. 2003). This list of criteria was devised in connection with a report produced for the UK government's Cabinet Office. Also, the *RGF* referred to in Tips and skills 'Data protection' states that 'research which is not of sufficient quality to contribute something useful to existing knowledge is unethical' (Department of Health 2005: para. 2.3.1). Whether this link that is increasingly being forged between ethical integrity and research quality is a distinctively UK orientation, as hinted at by Israel and Hay (2004: 52), is an interesting question.

Anyone intending to conduct social research at a site associated with the National Health Service (NHS) or that involves NHS personnel or patients will face the additional hurdle of having to secure ethical clearance from a Research Ethics Committee (REC). There is a national framework of RECs in the UK, and it is a requirement under the *RGF* to secure clearance. Before 1 April 2007 the system was run by the Central Office of Research Ethics Committees, but it is now under the National Research Ethics Service, which is part of the National Patient Safety Agency. The latter's website contains a great deal of information concerning the National Research Ethics Service, which details the process of

applying for ethical clearance for research involving the NHS and a variety of documents about its procedures (www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk (accessed 5 August 2010)). Three points should be noted about the system by anyone thinking of conducting social research that will require clearance by an REC. First, it is a slow process, so plenty of time needs to be allowed. Second, only around 15 per cent of applications are given clearance without further consideration. Most applications (around 64 per cent) result in issues being raised to which the applicant has to respond. Around 6 per cent are declined first time around. The rest are either considered by the REC not to be part of their remit or are withdrawn (Dixon-Woods et al. 2007). Third, RECs frequently raise issues about the quality of the research (see Thinking deeply 6.1).

A further issue is that gaining clearance for one's research may have implications for the research process, which in turn may have an impact on research quality. Graffigna et al. (2010) report their experiences in gaining ethical clearance for a qualitative cross-national study of young people's attitudes to HIV/AIDS in Italy and Canada. The two Italian researchers were located in a department of psychology in their university and the Canadian researcher in a nursing department. Data were collected from university students using both face-to-face and online focus groups in both countries (see Chapter 21 for a discussion of face-to-face focus groups and Chapter 28 for online ones). The research was concerned with the perceived gap between health knowledge and safe practices. The Italian researchers were



Thinking deeply 6.1

Ethics and quality in a study of REC letters

Angell et al. (2008) conducted a content analysis (see Key concept 13.1 for a brief description of this technique) of 141 letters written on behalf of RECs. These were letters written to applicants seeking ethical clearance to proceed with research involving the NHS. The letters analysed were either of two types: either they signalled an unfavourable decision (that is, the research could not go ahead because of concerns about ethical issues) or they gave a provisional decision (that is, clarification of certain issues was required or the applicant needed to indicate that he or she would change certain procedures in line with the REC's recommendations). Angell et al. found that issues relating to the quality of the proposed research, which the authors refer to as 'scientific issues', were raised in the context of 74 per cent of the letters analysed. The three most common concerns were: concerns about the sample; issues relating to the choice of methods; and concerns about the research question. For example, in the case of issues relating to the choice of methods, the most common complaint from RECs was that the rationale for the choice of method was unclear. However, they frequently also made judgements about the appropriateness of a method or how it was to be implemented. The point of this research is that it demonstrates that, at least as far as RECs are concerned, the distinction between ethics and scientific quality is not a stable one and that they frequently shade into each other. Thus, what is and is not an ethical issue is by no means a clear-cut matter.



Student and supervisor experience

Not doing research involving the NHS

The ethical approval process can be very offputting for students. This was certainly the case for Isabella Robbins, who decided not to go through the NHS to conduct her investigation of childhood vaccinations because of the problems of getting ethical clearance.

I avoided using state organizations—e.g. the NHS—because of the lengthy and problematic system of gaining ethical approval. I was advised to approach self-help and informal groups. I sent a letter of introduction to leaders and chairpersons of organizing committees running these groups, outlining the aims and objectives of my project. I prepared a leaflet outlining my research and I asked group leaders to post leaflets and posters in the halls where these groups are held.

Similarly, Supervisor C, when asked for the three most important pieces of advice he gives students when beginning a research project, wrote as one of the three: 'Do not conduct research with NHS patients or staff unless you have submitted an application for NHS ethical approval several months previously.' This point very much relates to the issue of building in sufficient time for submitting your research proposal to ethical scrutiny, as noted in Chapter 4.



To read more about Isabella's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

required to go through an ethical clearance process for the social sciences, whereas the Canadian researcher, because she was located in a nursing department, was required to go through an ethical clearance process for the health sciences. The former was relatively loosely structured and relied considerably on the researchers' conscience, although consent forms were required for participants. For the Canadian researcher, having to go through a health sciences track for ethical clearance, the process was much more structured and prescriptive, with a technique for recruiting research participants that was allowed in Italy being proscribed for the Canadian study. Graffigna et al. call this technique 'random walking', whereby the Italian researchers walked throughout the campus garnering interest in participation. The process of clearance also took longer in Canada, in part because of concerns about the confidentiality of the data collected through online focus groups. The authors conducted a discourse analysis (see Chapter 22) of the data and found some differences between the Canadian and Italian students. For example, the Italian students had less awareness of the disease but were more prone to irrational fears about it; the Canadian students had a greater sense of being able to control the disease. The authors argue that, while these differences may reflect cross-cultural differences, 'some of this variation might also have been due to the differences in recruitment, sampling and consent procedures specified by the IRB panels in Canada and Italy' (Graffigna et al. 2010: 348).

The authors feel that the random walking recruitment technique engendered a more heterogeneous sample than the Canadian sample, which was recruited through posters and leaflets. IRB is an abbreviation of Institutional Review Board and is a term used in North America to refer to a research ethics committee. The Canadian IRB rejected the technique, because people might feel coerced to participate. They also insisted on a much more detailed consent form than the one required in Italy. The authors argue that their recruitment technique resulted in the Canadian participants having a greater investment in and being more committed to the research, because they had actively needed to respond to the literature about the project. Thus, the different ethical requirements experienced in Italy and Canada had implications for the comparability of the research design and of its findings.

The point of this brief section is only partly to draw attention to the way in which ethical issues are becoming entangled with matters of research quality, because there is a significant implication of this development. This implication is that it is increasingly likely that committees charged with the task of considering applications for ethical clearance will be commenting on the quality of researchers' proposed procedures. If quality is deemed to be a component of the ethical domain, it is at the very least distinctly possible that applicants for ethical clearance will find themselves having to defend decisions to do with their sampling, their **interview guide**, or their questionnaire on technical grounds, in addition to the

areas, like those previously covered, that are part of the traditional domain of ethical considerations (for example, informed consent or harm to participants). At the very least, as the case described by Graffigna et al. (2010) implies, the decisions made by ethics committees will have implications for the direction of research. It is not surprising, therefore, that, although social researchers are generally supportive of good ethical practice in re-

search, there is a sense of growing frustration among many of them about the amount of time it can take to proceed with their research because of the lengthy process of clearance, especially when it involves the NHS, and growing evidence of ethics committee decisions affecting the design and quality of investigations (see, e.g., Hammersley (2009) and A. G. Miller (2009) from a UK and North American perspective respectively).



Tips and skills

The ESRC's *Framework for Research Ethics*

In the UK context, the publication by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 2005 of a document (the *Research Ethics Framework (REF)*) outlining its position on ethical issues and providing guidance on ethical matters was very significant. It was revised in 2010 and renamed the *Framework for Research Ethics (FRE)*. The ESRC is the major agency in the UK for funding social scientific research. It provides funding both for research projects, usually carried out by academics applying for support for significant investigations, and for postgraduate research in the form of studentships. The *FRE* outlines the Council's requirements in terms of ethical practice(s) for the research it supports. There is a broader perspective, too, in that the ESRC intends through the *FRE* to influence the ethical practices of social science research generally; in other words, it intends the influence of the *FRE* to extend beyond research it supports. The *FRE* lays down six principles of ethical research on page 3.

1. As noted above, ethical research is of a high quality. Thus, if a study is poorly designed, quite aside from the fact that it almost certainly would not receive financial support from the ESRC, it is unethical.
2. 'Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation entails and what risks, if any, are involved.'
3. Confidentiality of information must be maintained and anonymity of participants respected.
4. The involvement of research participants must be entirely voluntary.
5. 'Harm to participants must be avoided in all instances.'
6. 'The independence of research must be made clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.'
This draws attention to the possible role of affiliation bias to which some writers on ethics in research draw attention (Bell and Bryman 2007).

It is striking that the inclusion of the issue of quality in principle 1, of research staff in principle 2 (thus including researcher safety within the purview of research ethics), and of possible conflicts of interest in principle 6 extends the reach of ethical issues when compared to those explored by Diener and Crandall (1978), which were reviewed above.

Also of considerable significance are the ESRC's proposals for the ways in which ethical issues should be given due consideration. The following are the main points concerning the Council's expectations regarding the process of handling ethical issues.

- ESRC does not expect ethical approval to have been obtained before submitting a proposal for funding. However, applicants need to specify what ethical approval is needed and how it will be achieved.
- When a proposal is peer-reviewed, reviewers and assessors are asked to comment on the self-assessment. This may lead to rejection if reviewers or assessors feel the self-assessment is wholly inadequate.
- If the application is successful, the ESRC will not release funds until there is a written confirmation from the institution where the research is to be conducted that the ethical approval outlined in the self-assessment has been completed.

- In some cases, only an 'expedited review' will be required. This will be when the risk of harm to participants or others is small. It will normally involve a member (or possibly more) of a research ethics committee conducting the review.
- When full ethical review is deemed to be needed, a research ethics committee will conduct such a review. The ESRC has laid down guidelines concerning who should be members of such committees.
- Institutions must ensure that there are mechanisms in place to monitor ongoing research projects so that any changes to the ethical issues involved in an investigation can be addressed. This provision is meant to ensure that ethical approval is an ongoing activity.

It is interesting to note the ESRC's views on what kinds of research would *not* be viewed as appropriate for expedited review—that is, projects that involve more than what is referred to as 'minimal risk' of harm to participants or others connected to the research. Examples it provides are:

- research involving vulnerable groups;
- research involving people who lack capacity;
- research involving sensitive topics;
- 'research involving deceased persons, body parts or other human elements';
- 'research using administrative data or secure data', especially when the data need to be linked and/or where participants may be identified;
- research involving groups that necessitate permission from a gatekeeper (for example, children, elderly);
- research involving deception or lack of full informed consent;
- research involving access to records or personal/confidential information;
- 'research which would or might induce psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation, or cause more than minimal pain' (*FRE*, p. 9, emphasis removed);
- research involving intrusive interventions or research methods;
- research involving threats to the safety of researchers;
- research involving members of the public engaged in a research role;
- research involving investigations outside the UK where issues to do with local customs and practices may arise;
- research involving online data collection, especially when visual images and/or sensitive topics are concerned;
- other research methods in which visual and vocal elements figure strongly, due to possible problems of identifying people;
- 'research which may involve data sharing of confidential information beyond the initial consent given' (*FRE*, p. 9, emphasis in original).

One of the most striking features about this list is that it is much longer than the one provided in the *REF*, five years earlier. There are many other observations that could be made about the *FRE*, but these are particularly salient ones. I have spent some time on it, because it is likely to influence many universities' and colleges' practices with regard to ethical review. As such, it is likely to implicate many students conducting research projects of various kinds and levels. The *FRE* can be found at:

www.esrc.ac.uk/Images/Framework_for_Research_Ethics_tcm8-4586.pdf (accessed 5 July 2011)



Student experience

Ethical approval takes time

In Chapter 4, the point was made on several occasions about the need to manage your time when preparing a dissertation. Many of the stages take longer than you might imagine. In the case of Emma Taylor's group project looking into the impact of drinking laws in Scotland on behaviour and attitudes towards drinking, the length of time required to gain ethical clearance for the administration of the students' questionnaire was considerable:

our group had faced many ethical barriers in terms of what we could ask people and where we could ask it. Initially, we had had a completely different research question to what we used in the end—this was due to it being rejected by ethics, meaning we had to completely change our research project, which cost us time and effort.

Similarly, Alice Palmer wrote somewhat poignantly that one thing she would have done differently was that she 'would have taken more care with the ethics paperwork earlier on as that was the only really stressful part and my failure to use the official university ethics forms came back to haunt me later'.



To read more about Emma's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/



The difficulties of ethical decision-making

The difficulty of drawing the line between ethical and unethical practices can be revealed in several ways. The issue of some members of social settings being aware of the researcher's status and the nature of his or her investigation has been mentioned on several occasions. Manuals about interviewing are full of advice about how to entice interviewees to open up about themselves. Interviewers frequently err on the low side when asked how long an interview will take. Women may use their identity as women to influence female interviewees in in-depth interviews to probe into their lives and reveal inner thoughts and feelings, albeit with a commitment to feminist research (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984). Qualitative research is frequently very open-ended, and, as a result, research questions are either loose or not specified, so that it is doubtful whether ethnographers in particular are able to inform others accurately about the nature of their research. Perhaps, too, some interviewees find the questions we ask unsettling or find the cut and thrust of a focus group discussion stressful, especially if they inadvertently reveal more than they might have intended.

There are, in other words, many ways in which there is the potential for deception and, relatedly, lack of informed consent in social research. These instances are, of course, a very far cry from the deceptions perpetrated in the research summarized in Research in focus 6.1 and

6.2, but they point to the difficulty of arriving at ethically informed decisions. Ethical codes give advice on patently inappropriate practices, though sometimes leaving some room for manoeuvre, as we have seen, but less guidance on marginal areas of ethical decision-making. Indeed, guidelines may even be used by research participants *against* the researcher when they seek to limit the boundaries of a fieldworker's investigation (Punch 1994).

It also has to be recognized that there is sometimes a clash between the ethically desirable and the practical. For example, it was previously noted that some researchers like to secure the informed consent of research participants by asking them to sign a consent form. However, it has been shown that the requirement to sign such a form reduces prospective participants' willingness to be involved in survey research. For example, one study from the USA showed that 13 per cent of respondents were willing to participate in a study but not if they were required to sign a consent form (Singer 2003). The problem then is that, if signed consent is insisted upon, it seems likely that the resulting sample will be biased (see Chapter 8 for a discussion of sampling bias). This has led Groves et al. (2004) to recommend that, for survey research, it is the interviewer who should sign the form, indicating that the respondent has given his or her verbal informed consent.

New media and difficult decisions

The Internet has also thrown up new dimensions of ethical decision-making for social researchers. For example, it is very tempting to use newsgroups, chatrooms, listservs, email discussion groups, and so on as interesting fodder for examining interaction or a focus of interest. In Internet circles, such 'lurking' is extremely frowned upon. However, quite aside from such condemnation, it is ethically debatable how far it is acceptable to treat such ongoing interactions as 'documents' that are ripe for analysis. When participants have not given their assent to having their postings used in this way, it could be argued that the principle of informed consent has been violated. However, it could also be claimed that, in some cases, such postings are in the public domain, much like letters to newspapers, so that seeking consent is unnecessary.

Whether electronic communications are public or private is currently a matter of some debate. Pace and Livingston (2005: 39) argue that such electronic communications should be used for research only if:

- the information is publically archived and readily available;
- no password is required to access the information;
- the material is not sensitive in nature;
- no stated site policy prohibits the use of the material.

These authors suggest that, if these conditions do not pertain, informed consent needs to be obtained and should be obtained without disrupting ongoing online activity. They also argue that identities and confidentiality must be protected. These guidelines are not without problems. For example, who decides whether material is 'sensitive in nature'? What is or is not sensitive is likely

to be highly debatable, so treating it as a principle is not in the least straightforward. Issues like this bring out the difficulties associated with ethical decision-making. Internet research methods will be explored further in Chapter 28.

Research methods using visual media like photographs have become increasingly popular as embellishments of traditional techniques. An example is the rise of visual ethnography, which is discussed in Chapter 19. The growth of interest in visual research methods has almost certainly been stimulated by the popularity of digital cameras and the greater availability of camcorders. However, visual methods can also result in some difficult decisions too. It is clearly desirable to obtain the informed consent of those who appear in photographs, but it may not be possible to do this for absolutely everyone who appears. Some people may be in the background and may have moved off before they can be asked to provide their informed consent. Further, the significance of a photograph may become apparent only when the visual and non-visual data are being analysed, and by then it may not be possible to establish informed consent with those affected. In my book on Disneyization (Bryman 2004a), I would very much have liked to use a photograph I took while in the Asia region of Disney's Animal Kingdom in Orlando, Florida. I had taken a photograph of one of the 'cast members' who was dressed in thematically appropriate attire because he had been holding an insect that had intrigued both of us. It occurred to me later that it would have been an excellent illustration of the use of the body in theming, but I felt it was inappropriate to use it because of the lack of informed consent. One solution is to 'pixelate' people's faces so that they cannot be identified, a strategy that is discussed in Chapter 19.



Politics in social research

However, ethics are by no means the only context within which issues to do with wider principles are relevant to and intrude into social research. In a sense, ethical issues are part of a wider consideration of the role that values play in the research process. But the ways in which values are relevant is not just to do with the ethical dimensions of research. In Chapter 2, in the section on 'Influences on the conduct of social research', it was noted that values intrude in all phases of the research

process—from the choice of a research area to the formulation of conclusions. This means that the social researcher is never conducting an investigation in a moral vacuum—who he or she will influence a whole variety of presuppositions that in turn have implications for the conduct of social research. This view is widely accepted among social researchers, and claims that social research can be conducted in a wholly objective, value-neutral way are now heard far less frequently. While quantitative

research is sometimes depicted as committed to objectivity (e.g. Lincoln and Guba 1985), it is not at all clear that nowadays this principle is as widely endorsed among quantitative researchers as a desirable and feasible feature as qualitative researchers would have us believe.

For some writers on social research, a 'conscious partiality', as Mies (1993: 68) calls it, is celebrated. Particularly among feminist researchers, to do research on women in an objective, value-neutral way would be undesirable (as well as being difficult to achieve), because it would be incompatible with the values of feminism. Instead, many feminist researchers advocate a stance that extols the virtues of a commitment to women and exposing the conditions of their disadvantage in a male-dominated society. Much of such research has been concerned to change the situation of women, as well as to heighten our understanding of the disadvantages from which they suffer.

Considerations of this kind begin to draw attention to the way in which *politics* (in the non-party-political sense of the working-through of power and contests over its exercise) plays an important role in social research. Politics becomes important in different contexts and ways.

- Social researchers are sometimes put in the position where they *take sides*. This is precisely what many feminist researchers do when they focus on women's disadvantages in the family, the workplace, and elsewhere, and on the possibilities for improving their position. However, some writers have argued that this process of taking sides is pervasive in much sociology (see Thinking deeply 6.2).
- Related to this point is the issue of *funding* research. Much social research is funded by organizations such as firms and government departments. Such organizations frequently have a vested interest in the outcomes of the research. The very fact that some research is funded, while other research is not, suggests that political issues may be involved, in that we might anticipate that such organizations will seek to invest in studies that will be useful to them and that will be supportive of their operations and world views. Frequently, they are proactive, in that they may contact researchers to carry out an investigation or they will launch a call for researchers to tender bids for an investigation in a certain area. When social researchers participate in such exercises, they are participating in a political arena because they are having to tailor their research concerns and even research questions to a body that defines or at least influences those research concerns and research questions. Bodies like govern-

ment departments (such as the Home Office) are going to be influenced by notions of relevance to their work and by their understanding of ministers' concerns. As a result, as G. Hughes (2000) observes in relation to research in the field of crime, an investigation of gun crimes among Britain's 'underclass' is more likely to be looked upon favourably for funding than one concerned with state-related misdemeanours. R. Morgan (2000) points out that research funded by the Home Office typically: is empirical; adopts quantitative research; is concerned with the costs and benefits of a policy or innovation; is short-termist (in the sense that the cost-benefit analysis is usually concerned with immediate impacts rather than longer-term ones); and is uncritical (in the sense that government policy is not probed but is concerned with the effectiveness of ways of implementing policy). In addition, many agencies restrict what researchers are able to write about their findings by insisting on seeing drafts of all proposed publications. Even bodies like the UK's major funder of social research, the ESRC, increasingly mould their research programmes to what are perceived to be areas of concern in society and seek to involve non-academics as evaluators and audiences for research. Such features are related to the fact that the ESRC is itself involved in a political process of seeking to secure a continuous stream of funding from government, and being able to demonstrate relevance is one way of indicating standing in this regard. This predisposition on the part of the ESRC was enhanced in 2009 when it committed itself to what is often referred to as an 'impact agenda'. Applications for research funding after 17 February 2009 have been required to 'provide information about the potential impacts of research, pathways to achieving those impacts, and the adoption of interdisciplinary and innovative approaches' (www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Support/esrcexpectations/faq.aspx (accessed 6 August 2010)). This requires applicants to specify not just the anticipated academic impacts of the proposed research, but also non-academic ones. Specifying non-academic impacts requires a consideration of who might benefit from the research and how they might benefit. The impact agenda was met with disquiet among many researchers who felt that it meant that applicants needed to have a good idea of what they would find at the application stage (see, for example, the article 'Petition Decries "Impact" Agenda in Research' at www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=406931§ioncode=26 (accessed 6 August 2010)). However, the main

point to register is that the impact agenda represents in many researchers' eyes a ratcheting-up of a perceived preference for research that can be shown to be relevant so that future flows of government support will not be jeopardized.

- Gaining access is also a political process. Access is usually mediated by gatekeepers, who are concerned about the researcher's motives: what the organization can gain from the investigation, what it will lose by participating in the research in terms of staff time and other costs, and potential risks to its image. Often, gatekeepers will seek to influence how the investigation takes place, what kinds of questions can be asked, who can and who cannot be the focus of study, the amount of time to be spent with each research participant, the interpretation of findings, and the form of any report to the organization itself. Reiner (2000b) suggests that the police, for example, are usually concerned about how they are going to be represented in publications in case they are portrayed unfavourably to agencies to which they are accountable. Firms are also invariably concerned about issues of how they are going to be represented. Consequently, gaining access is almost always a matter of negotiation, and as such inevitably turns into a political process. The results of this negotiation are often referred to as 'the research bargain'.
- Once in the organization, researchers often find that *getting on* in organizations entails a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation of what is and is not permissible. In other words, there may be several layers of gatekeepers in any research project, so that issues of access become an ongoing feature of research. For example, for their research on cargo vessels, Sampson and Thomas (2003: 171) sought initial access through ship-owning or managing companies, but found that 'the key gatekeeper is invariably the captain'. Captains varied in the degree of willingness to accommodate the researchers' investigative and other needs, and their chief officers, who represented a further layer of access, were frequently delegated responsibility for dealing with the fieldworkers. These officers also varied a great deal, with the researchers quoting one case in which the chief officer wanted to call a meeting about how the interviews should be conducted and another giving a much freer rein. Moreover, researchers are often treated with suspicion and reticence because of uncertainty about their motives, such as whether they are really working for management. It is unwise to assume that, simply because gatekeepers have given the researcher access, they will have a smooth passage in their subsequent dealings with the people they study. Some research participants, perhaps because they are suspicious or because they doubt the utility of social research, will obstruct the research process. Researchers may also find themselves becoming embroiled in the internal politics of organizations as factional disputes rear their heads, and sometimes they may become pawns in such clashes if groups attempt to enlist them in getting over a particular viewpoint.
- When research is conducted in *teams*, politics may loom large, since the different career and other objectives of team members and their different (and sometimes divergent) perceptions of their contributions may form a quite separate political arena. However, this is unlikely to be a set of circumstances that will affect most undergraduate or postgraduate students, although the growing use of team-based assignments at both levels suggests that it could become more relevant to many students. On the other hand, supervisors of postgraduate research and undergraduate dissertations may themselves be evaluated in terms of the number of postgraduate students seen through to completion or in terms of the quality of undergraduate dissertations for which they were responsible. Therefore, wider political processes of this kind may be relevant to many of this book's readers.
- There may be pressure to restrict the *publication* of findings. Hughes (2000) cites the case of a study of plea-bargaining in the British criminal justice system as a case in point. The researchers had uncovered what were deemed at the time to be disconcerting levels of informal bargaining, which were taken to imply that the formal judicial process was being weakened. The English legal establishment sought to thwart the dissemination of the findings and was persuaded to allow publication to go ahead only when a panel of academics confirmed the validity of the findings.
- The *use* made of findings by others can be the focus of further political machinations. In the 1960s a study that showed the persistence of streaming and social-class differentials in a comprehensive school (at a time when comprehensive schooling was a political issue, having just been introduced by the then Labour government) was used by right-wing writers on education at the time as a critique of the case for comprehensive schooling.
- One further aspect that warrants mention in this section relates to what Savage (2010) refers to as the

politics of *method*. He argues the social sciences and Sociology in particular emerged as credible disciplines in the UK because their practitioners asserted expertise in the use of certain research methods that they used in a neutral and broadly 'scientific' manner. Thus, early researchers' use of sampling techniques, questionnaires, and interviewing were part of a gradual claim to be taken seriously as an academic discipline, allowing them to carve out a niche that differentiated them in terms of expertise from Economics. It is not that the early UK sociologists were claiming that they were the only professionals to use these research methods; after all, market researchers were well-known practitioners. Rather, they claimed an expertise in the use of these research methods for uncovering and exploring 'the social' either as a domain that had not previously been addressed by other academics or

if it had been addressed it had been done in a loose and largely unsystematic manner. This was a political battle for what Savage refers to as 'jurisdiction', out of which Sociology largely emerged as a winner. However, Savage also argues (see also Savage and Burrows 2007) that this jurisdiction is under threat owing to others using the very research methods over which sociologists used to claim special expertise and the emergence of new kinds of data about social issues in which sociologists play little or no role. As a result, the field of research methods can be viewed as an arena in which there are competing claims to methodological proficiency with regard to revealing the nature of the social.

These are just a small number of ways in which we can talk about a politics of the research process.



Thinking deeply 6.2

Taking sides in social research: the Becker–Gouldner dispute

In the late 1960s there was an interesting dispute between two sociologists who were leaders in the field in the USA and beyond: Howard S. Becker (1928–) and Alvin Gouldner (1920–80). Their debate raised many issues concerning the role of values and politics in research, but the issue of taking sides in research is a particularly interesting aspect of their dispute. Becker (1967) argued that it is not possible to do research that is unaffected by our personal sympathies. When we conduct research, we are often doing so in the context of hierarchical relationships (police–criminal, managers–workers, warders–prisoners, doctors–patients, teachers–students). Becker felt that it is difficult in the context of such relationships not to take sides; instead, the bigger dilemma is deciding which side we are on. Becker recognized that within the field in which he conducted his research at the time—the sociology of deviance—the sympathies of many practitioners lay with the underdogs in these hierarchical relationships. At the very least, the sociologist of deviance may seek to express or represent the point of view of criminals, prisoners, mental patients, and others, even if they do not go as far as to identify with them. However, when sociologists of deviance take the perspective of such groups, Becker argued that they are more likely to be accused of bias, because they are ascribing credibility to those whom society shuns and in many cases abhors. Why is a study stressing the underdog's perspective more likely to be regarded as biased? Becker proffered two reasons: because members of the higher group are widely seen as having an exclusive right to define the way things are in their sphere and because they are regarded as having a more complete picture. In other words, credibility is differentially distributed in society.

Gouldner (1968) argued that Becker exaggerated the issues he described in that by no means all research entails the need to take sides. He also argued that it was a mistake to think that, simply because the researcher takes the point of view of a section of society seriously, he or she necessarily sympathizes with that group. Much more recently, Liebling (2001) has argued that it is possible to see the merits of more than one side. Taking the case of prison research in the UK, she shows that, not only is it possible to recognize the virtues of different perspectives, but it is also possible to do so without incurring too much wrath on either side—in her case, prison officials and prisoners.



Checklist

Issues to consider in connection with ethical issues

- ☐ Have you read and incorporated into your research the principles associated with at least one of the major professional associations mentioned in this book?
- ☐ Have you read and incorporated the requirements for doing ethical research in your institution?
- ☐ Have you found out whether all proposed research needs to be submitted to the body in your institution that is responsible for the oversight of ethical issues?
- ☐ If only certain types of research need to be submitted, have you checked to see whether your proposed research is likely to require clearance?
- ☐ Have you checked to ensure that there is no prospect of any harm coming to participants?
- ☐ Does your research conform to the principle of informed consent, so that research participants understand:
 - ☐ what the research is about?
 - ☐ the purposes of the research?
 - ☐ who is sponsoring it?
 - ☐ the nature of their involvement in the research?
 - ☐ how long their participation is going to take?
 - ☐ that their participation is voluntary?
 - ☐ that they can withdraw from participation in the research at any time?
 - ☐ what is going to happen to the data (e.g. how they are going to be kept)?
- ☐ Are you confident that the privacy of the people involved in your research will not be violated?
- ☐ Do you appreciate that you should not divulge information or views to your research participants that other research participants have given you?
- ☐ Have you taken steps to ensure that your research participants will not be deceived about the research and its purposes?
- ☐ Have you taken steps to ensure that the confidentiality of data relating to your research participants will be maintained?
- ☐ Once the data have been collected, have you taken steps to ensure that the names of your research participants and the location of your research (such as the name of the organization(s) in which it took place) are not identifiable?
- ☐ Does your strategy for keeping your data in electronic form comply with data protection legislation?
- ☐ Once your research has been completed, have you met obligations that were a requirement of doing the research (for example, submitting a report to an organization that allowed you access)?



Key points

- This chapter has been concerned with a limited range of issues concerning ethics in social research, in that it has concentrated on ethical concerns that might arise in the context of collecting and analysing data. My concern has mainly been with relations between researchers and research participants. Other ethical issues can arise in the course of social research.
- While the codes and guidelines of professional associations provide some guidance, their potency is ambiguous and they often leave the door open for some autonomy with regard to ethical issues.
- The main areas of ethical concern relate to: harm to participants; lack of informed consent; invasion of privacy; and deception.
- Covert observation and certain notorious studies have been particular focuses of concern.
- The boundaries between ethical and unethical practices are not clear cut.
- Writers on social research ethics have adopted several different stances in relation to the issue.
- While the rights of research participants are the chief focus of ethical principles, concerns about professional self-interest are also of concern.
- Ethical issues sometimes become difficult to distinguish from ones to do with the quality of research.
- The Internet and other new media have opened up new arenas for ethical decision-making.
- There are political dimensions to the research process that link with the place of values.
- The political dimensions of research are concerned with issues to do with the role and exercise of power at the different stages of an investigation.



Questions for review

- Why are ethical issues important in relation to the conduct of social research?
- Outline the different stances on ethics in social research.

Ethical principles

- Does 'harm to participants' refer to physical harm alone?
- What are some of the difficulties that arise in following this ethical principle?
- Why is the issue of informed consent so hotly debated?
- What are the main difficulties of following this ethical principle?
- Why is the privacy principle important?
- Why does deception matter?
- How helpful are notorious studies like Milgram's electric shock experiments and Humphreys's study in terms of understanding the operation of ethical principles in social research?

Ethics and the issue of quality

- Why do issues to do with ethics sometimes become difficult to distinguish from issues to do with the quality of research?
- Is it possible to maintain a distinction between ethics and research quality?

The difficulties of ethical decision-making

- To what extent do new media throw up new areas of ethical concern?
- How easy is it to conduct ethical research?
- Read one of the ethical guidelines referred to in this chapter. How effective is it in guarding against ethical transgressions?

Politics in social research

- What is meant by suggesting that politics plays a role in social research?
- In what ways does politics manifest itself in social research?

**Online Resource Centre**

www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of ethics and politics in social research. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.